

Bush and Mitterrand Are Putting Moscow Ties Ahead of Lithuania

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KEY LARGO, Fla., April 19 — President Bush and President François Mitterrand indicated today that they put a higher value on improved relations with Moscow than on an immediate resolution of the situation in Lithuania.

Although the Administration has warned of retaliatory steps if Moscow cracked down on Lithuania, Mr. Bush said today that he was not ready to specify what steps he might take.

"I can't tell you when the United States might do something," Mr. Bush said at a news conference after a three-hour meeting with Mr. Mitterrand. "But my reluctance stems from trying to keep open a dialogue and discussion that affects many, many countries. And I'm talking about arms control. I'm talking about solidifying the democracies in Eastern Europe."

Although he called Moscow's sharp cutbacks of oil and natural gas to Lithuania an "escalation" of a campaign of intimidation, he said he remained hopeful that President Mikhail S. Gorbachev would negotiate with the Lithuanians.

Like Mr. Bush, Mr. Mitterrand made

it clear that he put a higher value on France's ties with the Soviet Union than on Lithuania.

"Priority must be given to a dialogue," the French leader said, squinting into the sunlight on this island south of Miami. "Then one will have to reflect about what happens if the dialogue is refused, depending on who refused the dialogue."

A senior Administration official said

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one reason for the President's continuing forbearance was a telephone conversation on Wednesday between Secretary of State James A. Baker 3d and Eduard A. Shevardnadze, the Soviet Foreign Minister. The Administration official said the talk had been "fairly encouraging" but would supply no further details.

Asked whether his patience had limits, Mr. Bush said it did and added: "Having said that, I am convinced that Mr. Gorbachev knows that there are limits in terms of this matter. I don't think that there is any danger that there will be a misunderstanding on this point. None at all."

All day, the White House insisted that the picture in Lithuania was unclear. On Air Force One flying south, Marlin Fitzwater, the White House spokesman, said the United States was receiving "conflicting information" about both the cutoff of oil supplies and the amount of oil the Lithuanians had on hand, making decisions difficult.

Mr. Bush told a questioner that "we have not been able to confirm, oddly, the exact extent of the Soviet crackdown" — even though the Lithuanian President, Vytautas Landsbergis, had described the situation earlier in an interview on Cable News Network.

Tonight, a ranking White House official said Mr. Shevardnadze had led Mr. Baker to believe that the Soviets were not planning to cut off Lithuanian oil supplies. Later, the official said the Administration had been flooded with conflicting reports from Moscow, Vilnius and elsewhere.

According to one account, he said, the Lithuanians had three months' supply of oil, so the cutoff was more symbolic than real; according to another, the supply was good for only three days; according to a third, natural gas supplies were still reaching private consumers but not offices and factories; and according to a fourth, all gas supplies had been cut off.

Little Domestic Pressure

"At this point," one of Mr. Bush's advisers said, "we just don't have any conclusions."

The President said he was still in "an early stage of consultation with allies." He spoke about Lithuania with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of Britain last weekend in Bermuda, talked about it with Chancellor Helmut Kohl of West Germany on the telephone on Wednesday and discussed it briefly with President Mitterrand this afternoon.

Mr. Bush's aides emphasized that he was under virtually no domestic political pressure to act quickly. Although Senator Bob Dole of Kansas, the Republican minority leader, has sug-

gested that the United States might have to replace oil denied by Moscow, and other lawmakers have spoken of providing tax credits to the Lithuanians, no one is pressing hard.

Conservatives who might be expected to raise their voices in favor of bold action to guarantee Lithuanian independence have, for the most part, praised the President's caution.

"He is in the perfect position to take his time and do exactly what he thinks is in the best interests of the country," said Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, the former United Nations representative who often speaks out on foreign-policy issues. "He's popular, he'll be President for three more years no matter what he does, and the issue isn't cutting much yet."

Not until the Lithuanians are shown to be suffering real deprivation from cold or hunger or disease, many political analysts believe, no outcry in this country is to be expected.

Poll Favors Gorbachev

At the moment, according to a new poll published this morning in *The Wall Street Journal*, 61 percent of the public thinks close links to Mr. Gorbachev are more important than support for Lithuania. Even if the Soviets were to use force to block Lithuanian independence, the poll indicated, almost two-thirds of Americans would favor going ahead with the Bush-Gorbachev summit meeting that is scheduled for Washington in late May.

Mr. Bush's meeting with Mr. Mitterrand took place at the Ocean Reef Club, a lush private resort of palms and hibiscus on this island at the beginning of the archipelago that leads south toward Key West.

Mr. Fitzwater said the bulk of the discussion between the two leaders centered on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and European reorganization in light of the sweeping change in the former Soviet satellite states.